

# Farm Aid Odyssey

Karma Glos

Kingbird Farm

This whole odyssey began with a brief chat I had with Greg Swartz after a field day at Cornell. Farm Aid would be caravanning through the state to collect food and tour farms; might I be interested in participating? Little did I know what this “participation” might involve. And so began a true journey of new experiences and connections, from the simple act of selling some good food to a complex dance with Farm Aid staff, media, concert fans, and rock stars in The Big City.

Not long after my connection with Greg I received phone calls from Mark Smith, Campaign Director for Farm Aid, regarding the purchase of food during the Upstate Downstate Caravan. During this whirlwind tour Mark and his crew would be visiting multiple farms throughout the state picking up local foods to be served backstage at Farm Aid 2007, Randall’s Island, New York. On Wednesday, September 5, sandwiched between lunch at Olivia Restaurant in Ithaca and a tour/food pick up at Evans Farmhouse Creamery in Norwich, the Farm Aid caravan arrived at Kingbird. Along with Mark Smith, truck driver Maxie Cohen, and Hank Herrera, Managing Director of the New York Sustainable Agriculture Working Group were the familiar faces of our local extension agents Monica Roth and Lael Gerhart, and of course Greg Swartz. The whole crew took a quick tour of the farm visiting our work horses (which Hank affectionately referred to as “plow ponies” in his blog), Highland cows, and five litters of boisterous piglets. We ended the tour in our perennial herb house where everyone fondled fresh sprigs of richly scented rosemary, the same rosemary headed south destined to herb the fingerling potatoes in the backstage catering tent. In addition to multiple bunches of rosemary, mint, and parsley, we loaded Maxie’s enormous refrigerated truck with sweet onions, fresh shallots, garlic, and breakfast sausage. We also passed along some gorgeous heirloom tomatoes from Three Swallows Farm, the same kind of tomatoes that Dave Mathews waxed poetic about three days later at the press conference (<http://farmaid.blogspot.com>). After loading up the caravan they headed off for Evans Farmhouse Creamery and then continued downstate on their way back to New York City.

Just before he departed our farm, Mark Smith handed us the real key to this whole adventure, comp tickets to the show. We had never really considered going until Mark bribed us with some tickets. This simple act of generosity set into motion our journey to the city, press conferences with rock stars, and more media attention than we’ve ever experienced. We headed to the city Saturday evening after market and left the farm in the capable hands of our apprentice. The drive down 81 through Pennsylvania was green and familiar. It wasn’t until Newark that we began to feel the pressure of the city. It wasn’t until the traffic jammed into the ethereal yellow tiles of the Holland Tunnel that I felt we had arrived. The tunnel spit us up into Manhattan and I could feel weight of the buildings around me and the heat of streets below me. We apprehensively turned our car over to a parking garage attendant and walked several steamy blocks down Broadway to Michael’s cousin’s apartment. Later that night I turned off the air conditioner, opened the windows to hear the city moan, and searched the barren rooftops for signs of life; a potted tree, a pigeon.

Next morning we caught the subway uptown to 125th and emerged on the street to find lines of X85 buses and blue police barricades. The bus to Randall’s Island took us through the littered streets of Harlem, over the East River, and deposited us at the enormous concert venue along the river. We followed the VIP signs toward the main stage and checked in at a little tent under a “Farmer Check-In” sign where we received lime-green stickers identifying us as “Farmers.” These stickers allowed us entry to a pre-concert press conference populated by Horizon farmers in red t-shirts, Organic Valley farmers in green t-shirts, other family farmers with “Farmer” credentials, and multitude of media with press credentials. We found our seats and quickly began to recognize faces in the crowd: Peter MacDonald of MacDonald Farm, Jean-Paul Courtens of Roxbury Farm, Paul Knapp of Cobblestone Valley Farm, Todd McLane from West Haven Farm, and many others. On the stage before us was a line of chairs labeled with the names of government officials, community organizers, farmers, food advocates, and of course rock stars. Among this illustrious group were Eliot Spitzer, Willie Nelson, Neil Young, John Mellencamp, Dave Matthews, Alice Waters, and New York farmer Zaid Kurdieh. Seated behind them were other celebrities including Daryl Hannah, the Ditty Bops, Derek Trucks, and Native American dancers in full regalia. The press conference followed what I supposed to be a typical ritual of formal questions, prepared remarks, and little soapbox speeches. Governor Spitzer said “farm” and “organic” more than I’ve ever heard a politician say and sounded remarkably dedicated to the goals he was espousing. Comments all around were informed and genuine, but by far my favorite ramble came from Dave Matthews as he carried on about the joys of tomatoes “big, fat, juicy, blowing up on itself tomatoes.” After about an hour under the hot morning sun the press conference ended with much cheering and we all moved on. Michael and I found the general admission gate and we began our long, busy day with 25,000 other concertgoers.



*Karma Glos photo by Myra Seay*

Our first task was to case the joint, find the food, and visit the many informational tents of the Homegrown Village. We were delighted to find all sorts of familiar folks from Water Keeper Alliance, Hawthorn Valley, Cornell Cooperative Extension, Campaign for Family Farms and the Environment, and NOFA-New York. After making the rounds we settled our blanket in the shade of an enormous tractor and had a little lunch. I picked up a BBQ pork chop sandwich from Patchwork Family Farms and while waiting for my food I chatted with the farmer behind the counter about hog breeds and cutting chops for leanness. The sandwich was good, though leaner than I like; I'm partial to those fatty Tamworth hogs myself.

After lunching and napping a bit we revived just in time to catch the funky reggae rap of Matisyahu as he exploded across the stage. Between sets we headed to the Farm Yard tent to fulfill our half hour slot as farmers on call. We were there to answer questions, talk about farming, or potentially be whisked away to the press tent for interviews. As it happened we were immediately escorted by Farm Aid staff with a "Free Range" pass to the chaos of the press tent, stage left. The press tent was a jumble of tables, laptops, water bottles, and camera equipment manned by dozens of press people with media and photo credentials. We were quickly shuffled to the back of the tent and interviewed by a writer for Paste Magazine who also happens to raise Gloucester Old Spot pigs on his own farm. After a quick discussion on hogs, farming, and Farm Aid the media organizer came to say she wanted one of us to interview with an "artist." At first I thought perhaps someone was going to sketch us, but I quickly realized she meant "artist" as in "musician". The musician currently on stage was Derek Trucks of The Allman Brothers Band and The Derek Trucks Band. Sure enough, amidst flashing cameras, Derek Trucks and his wife Susan Tedeschi arrived in the press tent. We were quickly introduced before being hustled to a table where we were seated before the press. Most of the questions were directed to Derek, but he shifted the conversation a bit by handing me the mic and telling the press they should hear from the farmer too. I'm not entirely sure what I said as the cameras flashed and Guster boomed from the stage, but Michael assures me it was witty and brilliant. At the end Susan Tedeschi made some great comments about the need for sound farming practices and told me how hard it was for her to find good food for her children, especially while on the road. As the press finished up by photographing Derek and Susan, I slipped away to rejoin Michael and we were immediately escorted backstage for a video interview. Backstage the crews were working at a fevered pace, moving Guster's equipment off and setting up for Warren Hayes. Tour buses were lined up like a shiny wagon circle and half a dozen tractor trailers were packed with sound equipment. As we rushed on to the Farm Aid trailers, Michael brushed by Daryl Hannah without a notice. Later he said I imagined it.

After our video interview for Farm Aid, Mark said we should stay backstage and have a little dinner at the catering tent that featured New York farm food. We gladly accepted and settled down among the artists, staff, and crew to have some food while watching Counting Crows on the big screens. The food was very good and I thought it quite possibly could be my rosemary on those tasty banana fingerlings. After a much needed break in the shade of the catering tent, we wandered to stage right and caught the end of a rocking good set by The Allman Brothers Band. At this point we realized we should never leave backstage, because with out Mark Smith and his "Free Range" and "Escort" passes we would never be able to return. We had no credentials except for our lime green "Farmer" stickers so we stayed right where we were and tried to look

like we belonged. I was sure we would never see our blanket and back pack two football fields away under the tractor, but that was the price I was willing to pay to see Willie so close. Fortunately for us, our ever-handy NOFA-NY director Greg Swartz appeared and loaned Michael his pass. Greg even carted off our backpack so we wouldn't have to haul it around all night. Truly above and beyond the call of duty, helping organic farmers wherever and whenever he is needed.

While Michael was away dealing with the backpack, I enjoyed a wonderful set by Dave Matthews and Tim Reynolds during which Dave again waxed poetic about tomatoes "so good they make your mouth hurt." The man truly loves his tomatoes. By the end of his set I was officially walloped and I complained loudly that concert schedules are not compatible with farmer schedules. We returned to the catering tent, intending to remedy the situation with good strong coffee (Dean's Beans and Organic Valley milk), but instead napped through John Mellencamp and Neil Young. Hank Herrera from the Farm Aid Caravan napped with us for a while then headed off with his press pass to get some close ups of Neil Young. Around 11 PM we shook ourselves off and returned to stage right in time to see Willie Nelson and Family, and Neil Young, and Susan Tedeschi, and Derek Trucks, and so many others. As the finale "On the Road Again" finished to thunderous applause, we dragged ourselves out past the tour buses to the city buses waiting to transport thousands of fans back to Manhattan. We snoozed on the packed subway, and wandered a bit dazed back to the apartment in the sky. We fell into bed, the city was still roaring outside, and took a much-needed rest after one of the most exciting nights these farmers have ever had.



**Farm Aid's Upstate/Downstate Caravan picking up apples from Wetshaven Farm in Ithaca, NY.**  
Pictured from Left to Right: John Bokaer-Smith (West Haven Farm), Greg Swartz (NOFA-NY), Lael Gerhart (Tompkins CCE), Mark Smith (Farm Aid), Karen Livingston (NOFA-NY Board), Joe Livingston, Maxie Cohen (Food Link). *Photo by Hank Herrera, NYSAWG*

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